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Is Press Awakening to Reagan's Deceptions?

President Reagan and his news handlers must be wondering what hit them. After nearly six years of brilliant success in making, shaping and faking the news to suit their interests, a string of misfortunes has put them on the defensive. On Oct. 2, disclosure of the White House disinformation campaign concerning Libya. On Oct. 5, the crash in Nicaragua of the C-123 cargo plane containing the voluble Eugene Hasenfus and documents linking officials including Vice President Bush to an illegal

At whom was the disinformation program to be aimed? Col. Gadhafi, certainly, but also at the U.S. press. In December 1981 headlines trumpeted out the news, leaked by the administration, that Col. Gadhafi had sent a hit team to assassinate President Reagan. By the end of the year, after a bracing spate of Demon Libya stories, the hit-team scare disappeared as suddenly as it came.

(Even if the watchdogs could be pardoned for ignoring the ancient history of 1981, one might reasonably have expected them, pondering Mr. Woodward's story, to scrutinize once more the rationale for the bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi in July. Did those famous intercepts really show that Libya had ordered the bombing of the West Berlin discotheque? Maybe not, and indeed on Oct. 29 John Lawrence of ABC News reported that top West German officials were now blaming the outrage on Syria. So much for the irrefutable evidence cited in July.)

An administration prepared to lie to the press about Libya would surely have no compunction in adopting the same tack about Nicaragua. But when Alfonso Chardy of the Miami Herald carefully documented just such a disinformation campaign, the pack was silent.

Mr. Chardy reported on Oct. 13 that the president had authorized this campaign at the start of 1983, calling for a "public diplomacy" (i.e., disinformation) program superintended by the National Security Council and "designed to generate support for our national security objectives." He ordered it to be merged with an incipient effort then called Project Truth. The public diplomacy program seems to have consisted mostly of leaking anti-Nicaraguan material to journalists who faithfully relayed it to their readers without saying where it came from. The usefulness of this operation, subsequently transferred to the State Department, was best demonstrated by the great disinformation coup of Election Night 1984, when television reporters—Bernard Kalb's brother Marvin among those in the lead—breathlessly cited White House tips about a shipload of Soviet MiG fighters nearing Nicaragua. With tremendous Reaganite bluster about worrisome escalation filling the airwaves, any remote possibility of benign coverage of Nicaragua's first elections in history two days earlier was successfully averted.

Hasenfus: There's been some bracing journalism about the mechanics of how the Reagan administration, under the supervision of Vice President Bush and Lt. Col. Oliver North, has been funneling arms to the contras. But the pussyfooting has reached comical extremes. The trail of evidence linking the contras and their White

House suppliers is as broad as an interstate highway. The breaches of the Boland Amendment, the Neutrality Act and the Arms Export Control Act are plain for all to see. Congress banned arms to the contras in 1984, and the White House promptly went into the gun-running business. But yet the press talks about the "perception" that the administration "may have broken the law." Short of a signed confession from

Mr. Bush, what does it take to call a spade a spade, or a broken law a crime?

Reykjavik: The press found itself in the painful position, a few days after the summit, of having to turn to the Russians for an acceptable, non-disinformational account of the proceedings. Might this not prompt the watchdogs to ask themselves about misrepresentations of Soviet proposals in the past, including the disinformation campaign mounted by the White House in late July 1985 to counteract the effect of the unilateral Soviet test ban?

The McFarlane mission: The press is hot on the trail of this one, but it's hard to understand the surprise being voiced at the administration's arms supplies to Terror Central in Iran. The story has been around for a while. In October 1982, Moshe Arens, then Israeli ambassador to the U.S., told the Boston Globe that Israel had been supplying arms to the Khomeini regime "in coordination with the U.S. government . . . at almost the highest levels." The next day he informed the Globe that he'd "caught a little flak from the State Department" for his indiscretion and then confided that "The purpose was to make contact with some military officers who might one day be in a position of power in Iran." The administration may have been trying to buy back a hostage. It has certainly, in partnership with Israel, been trying to buy into a future Iranian government, down the post-Khomeini road.

This is an administration that has thought as much about news management, and practiced as much disinformation, as any in peacetime history. The milestones of its progress—yellow rain, the El Salvador White Paper of 1981, the "pope plot," KAL 007, Sandinista drug-running—stretch back through the years. The pack slumbered and only a few watchdogs rattled their chains. Now perhaps, amid the brave cries of "lame duck" we can expect the pack to start doing its job.

Viewpoint

By Alexander Cockburn

arms-smuggling operation. In the weeks that followed, the confusions at Reykjavik and most recently, Robert McFarlane's "guns for terrorists" mission to Iran.

The press, emboldened by this sequence of mishap and also by Republican reverses in the midterm elections, is now showing some signs of coming to life. Is it conceivable that the charmed existence—so far as critical coverage is concerned—enjoyed by this president is coming to an end, that the lap dogs will at last become watchdogs? It is not as though the press has been uniformly and utterly bad. There's usually someone, somewhere trying to tear the lid off the bad news and expose the evil men. But what's one watchdog on the edge of town? It's the steady canine chorus that restrains government and serves the public weal. What we need now is a bit of pack journalism, baying along the fragrant spoor, but judging by present form we have a while to wait.

Disinformation: When Bob Woodward of the Washington Post disclosed the program developed in August under the supervision of Adm. John Poindexter of the National Security Council and designed to bamboozle U.S. journalists and Moammar Gadhafi in equal measure, there were belows of outrage in the press and State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb rushed for the gangplank holding his nose. From most of the coverage you would have thought that disinformation from the Reagan team began and ended in late 1986. But it would have required no more investigative zeal than a trip to the clip files to see that this administration has been practicing disinformation a lot longer than that.

Back on Aug. 3, 1981, Newsweek reported that CIA director William Casey had approved "a large scale, multiphase and costly scheme to overthrow Kaddafi and his government" by means including a "disinformation program designed to embarrass Kaddafi and his government."